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ABSTRACT

The College Alcohol Study (1993) surveyed nearly 18,000 undergraduate students at 140 colleges concerning their experience of either "binge drinking" or "secondary binge effects" (harm experienced as a result of binge drinking by others). The survey found that 44 percent of respondents were binge drinkers (50 percent of men and 39 percent of women). Across the colleges, binge drinkers ranged from 1 to 70 percent of students on campus. On high drinking-level campuses, 87 percent of the non-binge drinkers living on campus experienced negative consequences of excessive drinking by other students (such as having studying or sleep interrupted, having property damaged, or experiencing unwanted sexual advances). On low drinking-level campuses, 62 percent reported experiencing such secondary effects of binge drinking. Non-binge drinking women living on campuses with high levels of binge drinking had almost twice the risk of experiencing unwanted sexual advances as their counterparts at lower drinking-level schools. Among 10 recommendations for college administrators are: (1) using student media to highlight the problem; (2) building alliances with the community; (3) restricting conditions under which alcohol is allowed on campus; (4) encouraging athletic directors to help promote mature behavior; and (5) appointing a health and safety advocacy committee. (MAH)

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February 1996

Secondary Effects of Binge Drinking on College Campuses

by
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Introduction

Heavy episodic or binge drinking on college campuses has long been viewed as a "right of passage" for young adults. Those who share this fatalistic perspective tend to believe that the behavior of drinking students is usually of little consequence to other students, especially to those who abstain or are light drinkers. Typically, according to this line of thinking, the antics of drinking students are a minor nuisance. Increasingly, however, college administrators and faculty are realizing that this sanguine view of student drinking is mistaken. In reality, the harm caused to non-binging students is both serious and widespread.

This bulletin summarizes important findings from the College Alcohol Study, a survey of college student drinking completed by the Harvard School of Public Health in 1993. For purposes of this study, "binge drinking" was defined for men as consuming five or more drinks in a row within the previous two weeks, and for women as consuming four or more drinks in a row. The study found that students classified as non-bingers experience widespread harm as a result of others' misuse of alcohol, which can be referred to as "secondary binge effects." These effects can range from interrupted study and sleep to destruction of property, assault, and unwanted sexual advances.

The College Alcohol Study is the first study of college drinking that is based on a representative national sample of both four-year colleges and individual students. The findings reported here may therefore be applied to all American four-year colleges, thus providing a national portrait of secondary binge effects on campus. (See The Higher Education Center bulletin, *Binge Drinking on Campus: Results of a National Study*, for an overview of the study's other major findings.)

This bulletin is written primarily for administrators at institutions of higher education, including college presidents, vice presidents, deans of students, and deans of residential life, who are responsible for developing and implementing alcohol and other drug policies on campus.

Other members of the college community who have a special interest in the prevention of alcohol and other drug problems—faculty, students, student affairs and residence directors, health services personnel, campus security, and other staff—will also find the bulletin to be a useful introduction to the problem of secondary binge effects.

Principal findings from the survey described in the bulletin include the following:

- In the two weeks before filling out the survey, 44 percent of all college students engaged in binge drinking.
- At nearly one-third of the institutions surveyed, more than half the students were binge drinkers during the two weeks prior to the survey. The highest percentage of binge drinkers reported by any school was 70 percent.
- On campuses where more than half the students were binge drinkers, 87 percent of non-binge drinkers reported experiencing one or more secondhand effects of other students' misuse of alcohol since the beginning of the academic year.
- Among non-binge drinking women, 26 percent had experienced an unwanted sexual advance by another student who had been drinking, and 2 percent said they had been victims of sexual assault or date rape by a drinking student.

These findings underscore the need for college administrators to give greater emphasis to actively addressing student

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alcohol consumption and providing a safe campus environment.

What gave new momentum to the anti-tobacco movement was the realization that secondhand smoke puts non-smokers at risk. Similarly, what may give momentum to the growing movement against student misuse of alcohol is an awareness that binge drinking also hurts non-binge drinking students—not just occasionally, but with truly disturbing frequency.

The bulletin concludes with ten recommendations that college administrators can consider for expanding their ongoing educational efforts to prevent binge and underage drinking.

"My friends and I decided to go to a frat party off campus. Everyone was standing outside of a big white house. . . .A big guy walked up to us and said, 'The keg's on the porch, help yourself.' He was so drunk he could barely stand up. The noise from everyone yelling . . . was almost deafening. People were running in the streets in front of cars. The thing that really sticks out about this is that there were police officers standing on the next street corner and they didn't come over and say anything, even though they were well aware of what was going on."

—Anonymous Respondent, College Alcohol Study, Harvard School of Public Health, 1993

The College Alcohol Study: Method

Researchers with the Harvard School of Public Health mailed a survey to a random sample of students at 140 American colleges. Nearly 18,000 undergraduate students responded. The participating colleges were situated throughout the country in 40 states and the District of Columbia. Two-thirds of the schools were public and one-third were private. Two-thirds were located in suburban or urban areas, while one-third were in small town or rural settings.

Students participating in the survey represented all four undergraduate years. There were slightly more juniors (25 percent) and seniors (26 percent) in the sample than freshmen (20 percent) and sophomores (19 percent), probably because 30 percent of the students were transfers from other institutions. A little more than half of the participating students were women.

As part of a 20-page survey, students were asked if, since the beginning of the year, they had experienced problems due to drinking by other students. They were asked about secondhand drinking effects

Drug-Free Schools and Campuses Act

While college administrators have long been concerned about student alcohol and other drug use, the driving force behind recent prevention activity has been the passage of the Drug-Free Schools and Campuses Act, codified as Part 86 of EDGAR (34 CFR Part 86). Failure to meet the Part 86 of EDGAR requirements can put a school's federal funding in jeopardy.

Part 86 of EDGAR requires that every institution of higher education enact policies to prevent the unlawful possession, use, or distribution of alcohol and illicit drugs by students and employees. Under the regulations, schools must distribute written information every year that includes:

- *a description of the health risks associated with the use of alcohol and illicit drugs;*
- *a description of any drug or alcohol counseling, treatment, or rehabilitation programs available to students and employees;*
- *standards of conduct that clearly prohibit the unlawful possession, use, or distribution of alcohol and illicit drugs by students and employees on school property or as part of any school activities;*
- *a description of the applicable legal sanctions under local, state, or federal law for the unlawful possession, use, or distribution of alcohol and illicit drugs;*
- *a clear statement that the school will impose disciplinary sanctions on students and employees who violate the standards of conduct; and*
- *a description of the sanctions, up to and including expulsion, termination of employment, and referral to local law enforcement.*

The regulations also require schools to prepare a written review of their programs every two years to 1) determine their effectiveness and implement any needed changes, and 2) ensure that the schools' sanctions are being consistently enforced. The written biennial review must be made available to anyone who asks for a copy.

The findings from the Harvard survey of college student drinking underscore the importance of school administrators adhering to the Part 86 of EDGAR requirements and developing a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to this problem.

such as being insulted or humiliated; getting in a serious argument; being pushed, hit or assaulted; having property damaged; having to "babysit" another student who drank too much; having studying or sleep interrupted; experiencing unwanted sexual advances; or being a victim of sexual assault or date rape.

Students were also asked about their own drinking habits. "Binge drinking" was defined for men as consuming five or more drinks in a row during the previous two weeks, and for women as consuming four or more drinks in a row. The study found that 44 percent of all the surveyed students were binge drinkers—50 percent of the men and 39 percent of the women. Non-binge drinkers were students who either drank less than these amounts or not at all.

Colleges were also classified by drinking level (low, middle, or high), based on the percentage of students who were binge drinkers. Across the 140 participating schools, binge drinkers ranged from 1 to 70 percent of students on campus.

"It seemed like everyone on our floor was drunk, except me and the R.A. They were all crazy. It scared me. I'd never been in the midst of so many people with no awareness of their actions. . . . The R.A. was laughing with them about their parties. I felt that I was the only sane person in the world."

—Anonymous Respondent, College Alcohol Study, Harvard School of Public Health, 1993

Colleges classified as "high drinking-level schools" had over half of their students reporting binge drinking in the past two weeks. Colleges classified as "lower drinking-level schools" had 35 percent or fewer reporting binge drinking in the past two weeks. The rest of the colleges were classified as "middle drinking-level schools" (36 to 50 percent). Students responding to the survey were about equally distributed among the three school classifications.

Secondary Effects of Binge Drinking

The results of the study showed that on high drinking-level campuses, with more than half the students classified as binge drinkers, fully 87 percent of the non-binge drinkers who lived in dormitories, fraternities, or sororities experienced one or more negative consequences of excessive drinking by other students. On low drinking-level campuses, with 35 percent or fewer students classified as binge drinkers, a still substantial majority, 62 percent, reported experiencing such consequences.

Table 1 shows the percentage of non-binge drinking students who reported each of eight problems caused by other students' drinking. Compared to students at low drinking- level schools, students at high drinking-level schools were more likely to report experiencing seven out of the eight problems.

The problem of sexual assault/date rape was reported relatively infrequently, and there was no significant difference in incidence between schools with high versus low drinking levels. It is important to note, however, that non-binge drinking women living on campuses with high levels of binge drinking had almost *twice* the risk of experiencing unwanted sexual advances as their counterparts at lower drinking-level schools.

Equally disturbing findings were reported in a June 1995 news release from the Core Institute on Alcohol and Other Drug Studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. According to their study, which compiled data from nearly 30,000 college students on 73 campuses, fully 77 percent of students who experienced unwanted sexual intercourse said they had been drinking or using drugs just before the incident, as had 50 percent of those who received threats of violence.

Implications for College Administrators

The secondhand effects of binge drinking jeopardize the collegial and scholarly environment that university administrators and faculty hope to create for their students. Some might argue that most heavy drinkers, if left alone, will eventually learn from the adverse consequences of their drinking and, as they mature, will approach alcohol consumption with a greater sense of responsibility. This is not always true, and in the meantime, other students, both non-bingers and those who abstain, are left to fend for themselves against the inconsiderate, insulting, intimidating, and sometimes criminal behavior of their binge drinking classmates.

The findings from the College Alcohol Study suggest that institutions of higher education should consider expanding their efforts to prevent binge and underage drinking. Educational programs are most often used by college administrators; these programs are important, but insufficient for achieving behavior change.

In fact, alcohol and other drug prevention experts have learned through research and field experience that the most effective programs are broad based and seek to change the social, legal, and economic environment in which students make decisions about their alcohol use. This perspective suggests several specific strategies for college administrators to consider, including the following:

1) Use student media and other opportunities to highlight the fact that intolerance for alcohol impairment and the harm it creates is normative. Use students' concern about secondary binge effects to mobilize students to support change efforts on campus.

Table 1. Percentage of Non-Binge Drinking Students Experiencing Secondary Effects of Other Students' Binge Drinking, by College Drinking Rate (Based on Students Living in Dormitories, Fraternities, or Sororities)

	School's Binge Drinking Rate[a] (Percentage of Students)		
Secondary Binge Effect	**Low - ≥35%**	**Middle - 36–50%**	**High - >50%**
Been insulted or humiliated[c]	21%	30%	34%
Had a serious argument or quarrel[c]	13	18	20
Been pushed, hit, or assaulted[c]	7	10	13
Had your property damaged[c]	6	13	15
Had to take care of drunken student[c]	31	47	54
Had your studying/sleep interrupted[c]	42	64	68
Experienced an unwanted sexual advance[b,c]	15	21	26
Been a victim of sexual assault or date rape[b]	2	1	2
Experienced at least one of the above problems[c]	62	82	87

Source: Wechsler, H., Moeykens, B., Davenport, A., Castillo, S., and Hansen, J. The adverse impact of heavy episodic drinkers on other college students. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 56: 628-634, 1995.

[a] Women binge drinkers report having four or more drinks in a row at least once during the last two weeks. Men binge drinkers report having five or more drinks in a row.

[b] Asked of women respondents only.

[c] Significant by a chi-square test, $p < .01$.

2) Build alliances with local community leaders, law enforcement personnel, and businesses to curtail illegal student access to alcohol. School-centered policies on alcohol will be unsuccessful if local businesses sell alcohol to underage or intoxicated students. To develop an effective community-wide approach, local stakeholders need to be involved from the very beginning in the planning of prevention programs.

3) Reassess campus judicial policies and enforce a "zero tolerance" policy for alcohol-related misconduct. Violent and destructive behavior perpetrated by drunken students should not be treated with leniency. Too often students are not held accountable for their actions when they are intoxicated. Excusing them or issuing a "slap on the wrist" encourages them to continue their irresponsible behavior.

4) Restrict the conditions under which alcohol is allowed on campus. The College Alcohol Study found that students living on campus are most affected by the negative consequences of other students' alcohol use. Institutions of higher education have a legal obligation to take reasonable steps to provide a safe environment for all students. Restricting the conditions under which students legally consume alcohol, and then consistently

enforcing these conditions, is an important part of exercising that obligation.

5) Strictly enforce the minimum drinking age law. On many campuses, underage students can easily obtain alcohol. The fact that the number of binge drinkers remains relatively constant from freshman to senior year is indicative of lax enforcement of the minimum drinking age law. This sends the wrong message to students, namely, that the law can be ignored.

6) Bar alcohol manufacturers and distributors from sponsoring student events and from marketing their products on campus. The alcohol industry depends heavily on advertising and special event promotions on campus to reach college students. Considering the multiple and pervasive negative consequences of alcohol misuse, including the overall denigration of the academic environment, many school administrators have already decided not to allow alcohol promotion on campus.

7) Work with student groups to create recreational activities that do not include alcohol. Colleges can sponsor regular social events where students can gather and enjoy themselves without having to drink or be around alcohol-impaired classmates. The College Alcohol Study found that more than 80 percent of students living in fraternity and sorority houses were binge drinkers. This finding underscores the need both to offer students alternatives to fraternity parties and to enlist student leaders of fraternities and sororities to be part of the solution in creating a healthier campus environment.

8) Encourage athletic directors to help promote mature behavior and to intervene when they observe excessive drinking and violations of alcohol policies on campus. The College Alcohol Study found that students who said that athletics were important to them were nearly one and a half times more likely to drink heavily. This puts athletic directors and coaches in a strong position to influence behavior and norms on campus.

9) Use college recruiting and student orientation materials to make clear to prospective students and parents that the university promotes a healthy social and academic environment where learning and campus life are not denigrated by the misuse of alcohol. Some schools may want to stress in these publications that they are not interested in students who are looking for a four-year party.

   This step will become essential as public awareness and concern about the problem of alcohol use on campus continues to grow. Parents, alumni, and local community leaders will hold administrators increasingly accountable for the secondary effects of students' misuse of alcohol.

10) Appoint students, faculty, and school administrators to a health and safety advocacy committee, whose job is to ensure that the rights of responsible students are not compromised by the alcohol or drug use of others on campus. Reporting directly to the dean of students, the committee can respond to student complaints, while also working proactively for changes on campus to reduce students' misuse of alcohol and other drugs.

* * *

Each college will need to assess the level and extent of binge drinking and its secondary effects on campus so that plans can be tailored to meet the institution's particular needs. Surveying students about their behavior and tracking the incidence of violence or property damage on campus are assessment methods already in place at many institutions. Once administrators and program planners have a clear idea of the climate on campus, they can take informed action to foster more responsible behavior. If colleges adopt the environmentally focused ideas suggested here, they will be well on their way to protecting the rights of responsible students and preserving the academic integrity of America's campuses.

Resources

The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention

The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention is a national resource center established by the U.S. Department of Education. The Center's goal is to assist colleges and universities as they work to change campus cultures, foster environments that promote healthy lifestyles, and prevent student alcohol and other drug abuse.

The Center offers five types of services: 1) information services, 2) technical assistance, 3) training, 4) national meetings, and 5) publications.

These services are available to all institutions of higher education free of charge. For additional information, contact The

Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention. The Center's address is:

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The Center has developed several other publications that address alcohol- and other drug-related problems on campus. Please contact the Center to learn what publications are available to address your specific areas of interest or concern.

The Center's newsletter, the Catalyst, is a good way to keep up to date on important developments in alcohol and other drug prevention in higher education, including new publications from the Center. Please contact the Center for a free subscription.

An electronic version of these publications can be downloaded from The Higher Education Center's home page on the World Wide Web (http://www.edc.org/hec/).

For more information, contact the U.S. Department of Education, Drug Prevention Program, FIPSE, ROB 3, 7th and D Streets, S.W., Washington, DC 20202-5175.

Other Publications

The following publications are recommended for additional information on student binge drinking, assessing alcohol-related problems on campus, and developing new policies to change the social, legal, and economic environment in which students make decisions about their drinking behavior:

Eigen, L.D. *Alcohol Practices, Policies, and Potentials of American Colleges and Universities: An OSAP White Paper*. Rockville, Maryland: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Substance Abuse Prevention, 1991. Available from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20847.

Presley, C.A., Meilman, P.W., and Lyerla, R. *Alcohol and Drugs on American College Campuses: Use, Consequences, and Perceptions of the Campus Environment*. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University, Core Institute, 1993. Available through the Core Institute, Center for Alcohol and Drug Studies, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901.

Ryan, B.E., Colthurst, T., and Segars, L. *College Alcohol Risk Assessment Guide*. San Diego, California: University of California at San Diego, Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Studies, UCSD Extension, 1994. Available from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20847.

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